

Approaches & Strategies for Teaching of Culture in English

Language Classrooms

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Abstract

This paper examines the various roles of culture in language teaching with the aim of increasing awareness for English teachers. Graves (2001) claims that culture is receiving increasing attention; Hymes (1972) views it as communicative competence; Larsen-Freeman (2001) as a fifth skill in addition to reading, writing, speaking and listening; and Kramsch (1993) as not just a fifth skill or even an aspect of communicative competence but the underlying dimension of all one knows and does. Regardless of how we perceive culture, the importance of culture in English Language Teaching has never been more important. Raising awareness of aspects of culture such as various pronunciations, translatable and untranslatable words, approaches to culture, who should teach culture, strategies for teaching language and culture, as well as several innovations and new studies involving culture and ELT will be discussed here.

What is Culture?

A language does not exist in a vacuum. It is rooted in the reality of culture and the customs of people. Culture is a way of life and is the context within which we exist, think, feel and relate to others. Webster's dictionary defines culture as the concepts, habits, skills, arts, instruments, institutions, etc., of a given people in a given period; civilization. Hinkel (2001) states that the term culture includes speech acts, rhetorical structure of texts, sociocultural behaviours, and ways in which knowledge is transmitted and obtained. Culture is manifested through body language, gestures, concepts of time, hospitality, customs and even expressions of friendliness. Hinkel further distinguishes between invisible and visible culture. Visible culture, more readily apparent, includes style of dress, cuisine, festivals, customs and other

traditions. The far more complex invisible culture is shown through socio-cultural norms, world views, beliefs, assumptions and values.

With such broad implications, people are often not even aware of the socio-cultural assumptions and beliefs that inform routine habits and may even be unable to examine or explain these taken-for-granted acts intellectually. While visible signs of culture, such as dress style, cuisine, festivals and customs can be discussed and explained fairly easily, in contrast, invisible culture is often acquired during socialization and becomes inseparable from an individual's identity. Simple behaviours often have the potential to cause misunderstandings, miscommunication or confusion in cross-cultural situations. Gestures and body language are one interesting example. In Turkey, for instance, raised eyebrows with an upward tilt of the head signify "no," while in American culture it usually indicates surprise or pleasure. Another simple parental gesture, such as holding the right hand up and curling the index finger back and forth, indicates "come here," while the same gesture can be seen as rude or obscene in other cultures, providing an example of possible misinterpretation or misunderstanding. Culture cannot be transferred from one culture to another automatically and requires greater consideration and care in communication strategies. Teachers need to be aware of visible and invisible manifestations of culture in order to be successful English language teachers.

English is considered an international language which bridges culture. International students admire and attempt to speak by simulating native speaker intonation. Yet, even native speakers do not agree about the correct pronunciation of English words. Pronunciation differs between British, American and Australian pronunciation in words such as aluminum, tomatoes, dynasty, respiratory, buffet and garage not to mention brand names like Mazda or Adidas. Widdowson (1994) claims that English is an international language which implies that it is not a possession which native speakers lease out to others while still retaining the freehold. Other people actually own it. Norton (1997) argues that English belongs to all the people that speak it, whether native or non-native, whether ESL or EFL, whether standard or non-standard. The influence of culture also has the potential to change and transform English to suit other standards, rules and expectations in language communication. No country or cultures have any greater ownership of English.

Some Important Aspects of Culture

It is clear that the words of a language cannot be automatically incorporated into other languages. How they function and what kinds of meaning they come to have depends on

culture and the use of connotative language and on many other influencing factors. Language is the most important medium reflecting the culture of its speakers. The expressions reflecting the culture of a nation may leave the students hesitant. In order to avoid confusion and misunderstanding, the teacher should provide the student with cultural matrices for those expressions and create suitable conditions to make the students infer their meanings easily. There are some important aspects of culture that learners and teachers should be familiar with:

- Languages cannot be translated word for word
- The tone of voice of a speaker's voice carries meaning
- Each language employs gestures and body movements which convey meaning
- All cultures have taboo words and topics
- In personal relationships, the terms for addressing people may vary considerably among languages.

Some English Cultural Words and Expressions

prom	hot dog	garage sales	apple pie
thanksgiving	prom queen	doggy bag	going Dutch
Dutch treat	TV dinners	prom king	potluck dinners
easter bunny	baptism	sweet sixteen party	
Baseball	halloween	drugstore	the tooth fairy
breakfast	DIY (Do it yourself)	BYO (Bring your own)	

TGIF (Thank Goodness It is Friday)

The above English cultural words cannot be easily understood by translating them word for word. When you want to teach them you have to give extra information about their characteristics and their usage in different social contexts.

The Importance of Culture in Language Teaching

It is an undeniable fact that every language is rich in vocabulary for the people who use it. One language may lexicalize a meaning that is not lexicalized in the other. The vocabulary of our language in some sense reflects what we choose to name in our experience of the world. It would not be surprising to discover that there are few words for snow in equatorial Africa or that speakers of other languages do not categorize "snow" in the same way as do Eskimos. Eskimo tribes commonly have many different words for snow to distinguish among different types of snow. These include specific words such as "falling snow", "snow on the ground", "fluffy snow", and "wet snow". Similarly, in the Urdu Language there are different words for the English word "rice" including chaval (uncooked rice), bhat (boiled rice), biryani (rice cooked with meat) and zardo (dish of sweet rice). One consequence of cultural variability is

that people from different cultures often misinterpret each other's signals. People's actions in different situations are greatly influenced by their culture. Their culture includes their customs, traditions, ways of thinking and the like. What is done or accepted in a particular situation, in a particular culture may not be accepted in a similar situation in a different culture. Thus, if the cultural conventions of the speakers are widely different, misinterpretations and misunderstandings can easily arise, or may even result in a total breakdown of communication.

Culture has become an increasingly important component of English language teaching in recent times. Damon (Hall and Hewings 2001, p.186) defines culture as "the fifth dimension" of language teaching in addition to other four language skills. Understanding the cultural context of day to day conversational conventions such as greetings, farewells, forms of address, thanking, making requests, and giving or receiving compliments means more than just being able to produce grammatical sentences. It means knowing what is appropriate to say to whom, and in what situations and it also means understanding the beliefs and values represented by the various forms and usages of the language. For these reasons, culture must be fully incorporated as a vital component of language learning. Foreign language teachers should identify key cultural items in every aspect of the language that they teach (Peterson and Coltrane 2003).

Tomalin and Stempleski (1993, p. 7) suggest that the teaching of culture should have the following goals:

- To help students to develop an understanding of the fact that all people exhibit culturally conditioned behaviours.
- To help students to develop an understanding that social variables such as age, sex, social class and place of residence influence the ways in which people speak and behave.
- To help students to become more aware of conventional behaviour in common situations in the target culture.
- To help students to increase their awareness of the cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language.
- To help students to develop the ability to evaluate and refine generalizations about the target culture, in terms of supporting evidence.
- To help students to develop the necessary skills to locate and organize information about the target culture.
- To stimulate students' intellectual curiosity about the target culture, and encourage empathy towards its people.

As teachers of English our aim is to make our students both linguistically and communicatively competent since linguistic competence alone is not enough for learners of a language to be competent in that language. Language learners need to be aware of the

culturally appropriate ways to address people, express gratitude, make requests and agree or disagree with someone. They have to understand that, in order for communication to be successful, language use must be associated with other culturally appropriate behaviour. Thus, learning a language will also involve learning the culture the language expresses.

Who Should Teach Culture?

The teachers of a linguistic community need several attributes. First of all, they need informed insight into the culture to be taught and secondly, informed insight into the culture of the language learners. Everyone might agree that this is asking a great deal. Certainly, it means that linguistic teachers require further study to foster intercultural understanding and appreciation. Specialized knowledge of how a culture is organized, the value systems, institutions, interpersonal relationships, adaptations to the environment as well as greater understanding of visible and invisible manifestations of culture are necessary. If possible, a language teacher should try to live in the target culture for some time. If not, a teacher might compensate by disciplined reading, study of the media, including radio, TV, films, newspapers and magazines. Contact with native speakers can also be very useful, especially with discussions of all sorts of subjects, visits to their home and meeting with their families provides added education into cultural interpretation.

Sensitivity to students' attitudes can also be developed to ensure respect and effective teaching strategies. The temptation to demonstrate superiority of any one culture over another should always be avoided. Teaching should not be prejudiced or approach invisible cultural convictions in a derogatory or discriminatory manner. Cultural content can be presented objectively, analytically and informatively. It is generally possible to find commonalities, universal themes and examples that also relate well across cultures. McKay (2004) states that in many countries, the teaching of English is becoming much more closely aligned with the host culture as those countries use local characters, places and issues as the content for their teaching materials.

Medgyes (2001) highlights perceived differences in teaching behaviours between NESTs (Native English Speaking Teacher) and Non-NESTs. Although non-native speaker teachers have many advantages, an ideal teacher is considered to have a combination of qualities, complementary to other teacher strengths and weaknesses and be able to collaborate in various ways in order to provide maximum benefit for students.

Current research involves some interesting innovations in cultural approaches to teaching. In the U.S., for example, teacher training programs are now beginning to assess teacher trainees

on their ability to successfully value and demonstrate cultural diversity in their pre-service lessons (Vavrus, 2002). Ibrahim and Penfield (2005) discuss the dynamic diversity of composition classes at the University of Arizona where ESL and NES students are sharing culture, mutual understanding, and developing rich learning environments, conducive to student interaction and idea creation. As a result, the composition classes have never been more popular. Marzano (2004) points out that the recognition of contrasts improves student achievement by up to 45% and is a very effective teaching and learning strategy. Teachers might adapt this approach in comparing and contrasting cultural differences during lessons. Gu (2005) discusses how teachers are 'front line change agents' in implementing educational reforms and how high quality communication is an important key to successful cross-cultural communication and collaboration. All of these aspects of current research emphasize the important role of culture in English language teaching.

Thus, the awareness of cultural aspects of language teaching can provide more successful teaching and learning experiences. Culture is an increasingly valuable and essential part of education in our global community. The teacher who begins to utilize cultural awareness as a resource may discover more motivated students, rich learning environments and developing insight among language learners as well as themselves.

Some Instructional Strategies for Teaching Culture

The goal of this section is to examine some instructional strategies and practical considerations which can be used in the teaching of culture in English language classes. There are many useful cultural activities and ideas to incorporate into the lesson plans to enrich and inform the teaching content. Some of them are as follows.

Culture Capsules

A culture capsule is a short description, usually one or two paragraphs in length, of one minimal difference between the culture of the source and target languages, accompanied by illustrative photos, slides or regalia. The technique was developed by Darrel Taylor, a foreign language teacher, and John Sorensen, an anthropologist (Hadley 2003, p.394). It can be used for independent study, in small groups or with the full class.

Proverbs

Proverbs are frozen phrases like idioms. They differ from idioms, however, in that they display shared cultural wisdom. Though people share proverbs with many different cultures we still must be able to interpret proverbs when we encounter them for the first time. We try to assign meaning to them in the context in which they are offered. Most English proverbs

have similar sayings in other languages. The way of expressing the idea may be different, however. Therefore, in many cases, a literal translation will not be appropriate. Using proverbs as a medium for teaching culture helps to examine the values that are represented in the proverbs of the target language being learned.

Authentic Materials

Language instruction has five important components--students, a teacher, materials, teaching methods, and evaluation. Using authentic materials, from the target language community helps students to have authentic cultural experiences. Sources can include films, newscasts and television shows, web sites, and photographs, magazines, newspapers, restaurant menus, travel brochures, and other printed materials. Teachers can adopt their use of authentic materials to suit the age and language proficiency level of students. (Peterson and Coltrane 2003)

Role Play

Role playing activities can be used for teaching cultural expressions. For instance, students can act out a miscommunication role play based on cultural differences. Other students in the classroom may try to find out the reason for miscommunication and suggest ways to create more effective communication.

Native Speakers as Cultural Resources

Exchange students, immigrant students or native speakers who speak the target language at home can be invited into the classroom as cultural resources. They can give information about the cultural life of that language.

Kinesthetics and body language

It is important for students to understand how gestures from different cultures are unconsciously used and may be easily misunderstood. Very few gestures are universally understood and interpreted. What is perfectly acceptable in one culture, may be rude, or even obscene, in other cultures. Thus, activities using pictures, role plays, dialogues and discussions allow participants to look a little closer at how body language might be interpreted by other people.

Semantic Mapping

Semantic mapping is a technique that was originally developed by Johnson and Pearson (1978) to teach vocabulary to children learning to read in their native language. It consists of creating a graphic arrangement of associated word clusters around a key word, idea or

concept. Hague (1987) proposes various strategies for using this technique in teaching foreign language vocabulary. To create a semantic map, she outlines six steps:

- write the foreign language word or concept on the blackboard
- ask class members to think of as many related words as they can
- write the words suggested words by the class in categorical clusters arranged around the original word.
- have the students provide category names for the clusters
- discuss the words and their relationships on the semantic map that has been created.
- revise the map, if necessary, after the group has discussed the various meanings and nuances of vocabulary that has been elicited.

Conclusion

Thus, the teaching of culture is an integral and essential part of foreign language instruction. Culture is a message to our students and the language is our medium as teachers. Culture should be addressed in lessons from the very beginning of instruction and continue throughout the entire teaching period. This does not imply that linguistic constructs should be overlooked or ignored but instead used as elements of culture embedded within the language and taught accordingly. Many ways to teach culture are available to teachers and include role plays, culture capsules, proverbs, literature, film, convention clusters, semantic mapping and use of other authentic materials. Successful English language teachers will be those who are informed about culture, those who study the culture with discipline and always search for creative and innovative ways to include culture in lesson content and materials. Researchers are highlighting the innovative and useful ways of using culture as a resource in effective teaching and learning.

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